

To the North Pole by Cherokee

*by Olin Branstetter
as told to Terry Rogers*

We have all read stories about various trips made by pilots - some have been dull while others were more exciting. But there is probably no trip which is more unusual than the one made in 1984 by the Branstetter family of Ponca City, Oklahoma.

That was the year the Olin Branstetter starting thinking about making a trip to the North Pole in his Cherokee 180. This trip is not one for the faint of heart and took a lot of advance planning to make it work.

"I looked at a lot of maps and did a lot of planning trying to decide whether a single-engine plane could make the trip and whether we could be the ones to make such a trip," he said. "I spent several weeks planning before I even told my family."

Eventually, he did decide the trip was viable and so he brought it up for a family vote - the unanimous decision was yes, they would go. Besides Olin, his wife Paula, and his then 21-year-old son Jack would make the attempt. All three were licensed pilots.

The decision made, it was time for preparation.

"First, I had the engine topped early enough so I would have 30 to 40 hours on the engine before starting the trip," he said. "Then I bought a new ADF. There was no loran in the high Arctic and no other form of radio navigation."

He collected sponsors for the trip. "Both Conoco and Phillips petroleum were sponsors, but Phillips said they wouldn't pay unless we made it back," he said. "They were pretty smart."

Mrs. Branstetter was in charge of weight and balance. "She began six weeks before the trip and weighed every item we were going to take and then tagged the item," said Branstetter. "Then she had to go into the plane and fit every item in."

"Just as an example, we were going to take a .30-06 rifle - you are required to take either a rifle or shotgun with you into wilderness. We finally settled on a shotgun because it saved one pound and two ounces."



The Branstetters return to Resolute Bay's Gravel Runway two hours and twenty minutes after final run to the north pole

They carried freeze-dried food, water, a first aid kit, signal mirror, space blankets and a coffee pot they used to heat up water. They did not take coffee, however. "The plane does not have a potty," he pointed out.

A week before the trip they made a local trip to simulate the final leg of the planned venture - a 300 mile trip from Ponca City to Fairmont, Nebraska.

"We had a rainy, overcast day," he said. "We loaded the plane to gross with bricks and made the trip using only our watches and pilotage to see how closely we could navigate. We got back to within two or three miles of Ponca City."

The trip began on a Sunday in June of 1984 and required two takeoffs - the first from Ponca City, the second from Bartlesville, Oklahoma, the then headquarters of Phillips Petroleum, one of the sponsors which wanted its own photo opportunities.

The first overnight stop was an airport in South Dakota - no luxury hotel here. All three family members stayed with the plane and slept on the hangar floor.

The next night, after crossing the Canadian border, Olin and Paula spent the night in a Winnipeg motel while son Jack slept in the Cherokee. At several stops along the way the entire family camped under the wings of the plane.

The third day they flew over Lake Winnipeg - 130 miles over water with a landing at Thompson where they exchanged their money for Canadian -



Eskimo Joe & Wife Pose Beside their Char (fish) on Victoria Island

especially needed was small bills. Many Eskimo villages were unable to make change for large bills.

The End of Roads

The trip proceeded to Gilliam - the end of roads. But there was one railroad to follow which went further to Churchill, a town which has the finest

Eskimo museum in the world. It was also the farthest point north at which the plane's magnetic compass could be used. From that point on, the procedure was to line up on a departing runway and set the directional gyro for the runway heading.

Navigation without radios or a magnetic compass requires a few different procedures. Part of the planning involved learning



Paula & Jack Heating Water - Camping Under Cherokee Wing



Time & Date - Family Took Turns Piloting Plane Around Pole

the exact precession rate of the DG.

"For three months prior to the trip I kept a record of all my trips," said Olin. I checked the DG every 30 minutes and kept a record of the precession. I learned that I needed to re-set the DG 3 degrees left for every 30-minute period, on average.

"Since the trip I have never met a pilot who knew

which direction his DG precessed - you simply set it to the magnetic compass without giving it any further thought."

Another navigation aid was provided by the Canadian government which prepared

charts showing the position of the sun every ten minutes.

"At that time of year there was sunlight twenty four hours a day," he said. "The idea was to turn the plane directly into the sun at the appointed time, then set the DG to the heading shown on the government charts. That is the only way you could get a heading en-route."

Churchill does have twenty miles of roads within the community.

"People ask me why I say Gilliam is the end of roads when there are roads in Churchill," he said. "The thing is that the roads in Churchill are only within the town - you cannot drive anywhere else. Even if you drive out to the he dump, twenty miles is the most you can drive - there is no place else to go."



Actual View of North Pole Over Cherokee Wing



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Into the Wilderness

Continuing on, Eskimo point is another 180 miles north, at the edge of Hudson Bay - it is a small Eskimo village.

"We ate caribou stew at the only restaurant there, a small restaurant without any windows to help preserve the heat. The stew was pretty darn good, though."

Baker Lake Village, 350 miles north of Rankin Inlet, was

another pretty good sized village with about 800 Eskimos and another 200 Caucasians. A local man built three cabins for guests. "Here it was the end of June and we were the first customers of the season," chuckled Olin.

"The cabins were a bit primitive - there was no restroom in our cabin, but in the next cabin you could use a five gallon bucket. There was also another bucket you could use to

pour water over yourself if you wanted a cold shower. We all declined the shower."

The beds were army cots. Also, they were told that during the winter months the three cabins were completely covered with snow and you could not find them until they thawed.

Baker Lake Village, like most Eskimo villages, had their own "airdrome," what they called their airports. Runways were not paved but were made of gravel. Also, they tended to be covered with snow and were indistinguishable from the surrounding area. They did have lights around them, however, so you could distinguish their location.

Further north you reach the 360,000 square mile Barren Lands. This is where the navigation became the most difficult. With three pilots on board the procedure was that the pilot in the left hand seat at any time was the captain while the right hand seat was for the navigator. The idea was for the navigator to stay about six or

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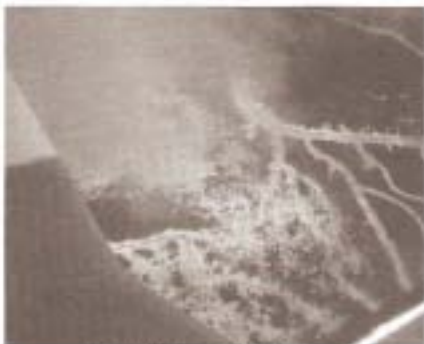
Olin Standing Behind the Meager Remains of a Beluga Whale After Butchering by Eskikmos. The Frozen Arctic Ocean is the Background

seven minutes ahead of the plane - that way, hopefully they would never be lost for more than 15 minutes. There are no roads, no radio signals, no towns, no railroads, nothing. No people live there so there are no houses or puffs of smoke. Nothing.

The only inhabitants of the Barren Lands are caribou, snowy owl, white fox, and Arctic Wolf. No people.

"We could see the edge of the North American continent and the beginning of the Arctic Ocean over to Victoria Island, our next destination," he said.

"Victoria Island is the size of Kansas and Oklahoma put together, but it only has two villages on it, Holman with about



Actual Aerial View of Magnetic North Pole

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300 residents and Cambridge Bay with about 600 people, mostly Eskimos."

Everything else in the area is frozen, but on the Island the sun warms things enough so the Rivers flow. At Cambridge

Bay they met a man known as Eskimo Joe and his wife. Eskimo Joe was fishing and each time he caught a fish his wife would dance and sing a song and kiss the fish on the mouth.

"We thought this was a bit strange, but after I started thinking about it I thought maybe it wasn't so far out," he said. "When your entire existence depends on whether you catch enough fish maybe it is not a bad idea to dance and sing and kiss the fish on the mouth.

"They not only have to catch enough fish for themselves, they have to catch enough to feed their dogs. Dogs often do starve in the Arctic during periods when fish are scarce."

The fish the locals catch

is Arctic char - a fish **which is** considered a delicacy in **most** parts of the world, but **which is** considered a staple of the **local** Eskimo's diet.

After Victoria Island was a trip to Cornwallis Island on Resolute Bay

"This leg was what I called our faith leg," said Olin. "You see, it was a leg longer than we could carry fuel for. The only way we could make it was to have a tail wind all the way and that required a lot of faith. We needed a wind blowing in our same direction - north, northwest. Luckily we got it.

The actual magnetic course to Resolute Bay was 30 degrees, but the magnetic compass in the plane simply meandered slowly from 100 to

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190 degrees and never indicated the correct course.

When they were 25 miles from Cornwallis Island they called on the radio and were informed that fog had just settled in on the ground. This is why single-engine planes simply do not travel to the area - they do not carry enough fuel to go to another airport when fog occurs.

The Branstetters made one pass over the airdrome and saw nothing. They flew back over the Arctic Ocean and turned for another pass. Luckily the fog raised just over the runway area enough so they could see to land. The runway lights were turned up all the way and were visible.

There is a weather station run by three Canadians on the island. In addition, a local couple, Terri and Bezel Jesudawson, have turned their home into a sort of icy bed-and-breakfast so the Branstetters had accommodations. Ironically, a four member BBC team was also staying at the home at the time. Bezel, formerly a native of India, was absent. He was in Winnipeg ordering a full year of

groceries and supplies which would eventually be delivered by ship later in the year.

"I asked Terri how anyone knows in advance how much toilet paper to order for an entire year," said Olin. "She replied, 'after the first year... we knew.'"

Eskimos have been on the island for about 1,000 years, but they do not live in Igloos - there is not enough snow to build them. Precipitation in the area is about seven inches a year - about the same as in the Sahara

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Desert. Basically, the same snow blows over and over. Most of the Eskimos there will live and die without ever having seen a bush or a tree.

"I did see one flower there," said Olin. "It was a small

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flower, growing in the wilderness with pretty purple blooms. It is called a Saxifrage and the Eskimos eat the flowers. I ate one and it tasted pretty good.

"It is amazing to see that even in a place as desolate as that wilderness one flower would grow and produce such a beautiful bloom.

"And just in case you every find yourself in such a place, I have been told that if you find anything which will grow there it is edible. There is nothing poisonous which grows above the Arctic Circle.

Now, on the 29th of June, it was time for the final leg, to the North Pole; it was also time to rely exclusively on the charts provided by the Canadian government.

"If there had been cloud cover we would not have been able to navigate," Olin said.

He was at the weather station when the three Canadians said the conditions were perfect. "I sent word to my wife and son to be ready in one hour - it was time to go.

"When I fired up the engine even the little Cherokee seemed excited. We took off and flew at 200 feet to get the benefit of a strong surface tail wind.

"The magnetic north pole is located at the west end of King Christian Island. When we got there Mrs. Branstetter was flying. She circled the spot and then I switched places with her and circled the pole. Finally, Jack climbed over the seat and changed places with me and he circled the pole. Then we dropped our assorted cargo: business cards, magazines and newspapers, a plaque with our names inscribed, an American flag provided by the American Legion and an Oklahoma flag courtesy of the Oklahoma senate.

"Actually, we have been accused of littering up at the pole."

